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ABSTRACT

As of the autumn term 1971, continuation school, gymnasium, and vocational school were superseded by an integrated upper secondary school. This was divided into five 3- or 4-year and four 2-year theoretical lines, thirteen 2-year vocational lines, and a large number of specialized courses. The purpose of this evaluation was to observe students' activities after leaving school and their situation in the community and working life. Evaluation was designed to furnish documentation on which to base deliberations concerning a revision of the upper secondary school objectives and other factors related to school organization. The evaluation was also aimed at highlighting students' opinions concerning content of subjects and groups of subjects, and the way in which teaching was organized. Questionnaires were mailed in March 1978 to a sample of approximately 100,000 graduates. In addition, interviews were conducted with 10 students each from the eight theoretical lines. Results are reported under headings related to: line take, social background, regional identify, sex; grades; post-secondary activities; student opinions of educational/occupational value of upper secondary schooling; and young persons' attitude to the value of upper secondary schooling as a factor of personal development. (JN)

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Title: EVALUATION OF COURSES OF STUDY AT UPPER SECONDARY SCHOOL (UTGY)

Project No.: 3060

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BACKGROUND, PURPOSE AND METHOD

As from the autumn term 1971, continuation school, gymnasium and vocational school were superseded by an integrated upper secondary school. This was divided into five 3 or 4-year and four 2-year theoretical lines, thirteen 2-year vocational lines and a large number of specialized courses.

The National Board of Education (NBE) was anxious for an overall evaluation to be undertaken of courses of study at upper secondary school, with particular emphasis on students' activities after leaving school and their social adjustment to the community at large and to employment. In the spring of 1977 the NBE decided to appoint a steering group to plan and direct an evaluation project concerning courses of study at upper secondary school. The evaluation has proceeded as part of the project "Evaluation of upper secondary school courses of study" (UTGY), the final report on which has now been presented (Axelsson, 1982).

The lines focused on in UTGY are the 3-year Economics, Liberal Arts, Natural Science and Social Science lines, the 3 and 4-year Technical lines and the 2-year Economics, Social and Technical lines. Comparisons are also made with vocational lines generally. The vocational lines have been evaluated on previous occasions, for example in the UTYRK project (Axelsson, 1977a, 1977b, 1978).

The purpose of the evaluation has been to observe the students' activities after leaving school and their situation in the community and working life. Evaluation has been designed to furnish documentation on which to base deliberations concerning a revision of upper secondary school objectives, the subject mix of upper secondary school, the dimensioning of courses of study, the form and content of SYO (educational and vocational orientation) activities and lines of upper secondary school in the context of recurrent education. The evaluation has also been aimed to some extent at highlighting students' opinions concerning the content of subjects and groups of subjects and the way in which teaching was organized.

In many ways, the work of the UTGY project has been conducted on similar lines to the UTYRK project. A steering group at the NBE has been attached to both projects, evaluation has been based exclusively on data from students, and the evaluation methods have comprised questionnaires and interviews administered by the Statistics Sweden.

The questionnaire used in the UTGY projcet was distributed in March 1978 to a sample of the approximately 100 000 young persons leaving compulsory school in the spring of 1971. This sample comprises a one-eighth selection of school classes. Our report includes only those persons replying in the questionnaire that they had started a line of upper secondary school in 1971 which they had completed by March 1978, and that they had not embarked on any other upper secondary school studies.

Ten young persons were interviewed from each of the eight theoretical lines of upper secondary school. The nuclear material from the interviews is utilized in the final report (Axelsson, 1982). Previously the interviews were presented more or less in extenso (Axelsson, 1981).

RESULTS

Line take, social background, regional identity and sex

There was an uneven balance between the sexes in the various lines, with women predominating in some and men in others. This in itself entitles us to say that upper secondary schooling tends to thwart rather than promote one of the objectives of its activities, namely that of encouraging the equality of men and women.

Inequalities also exist between groups with different social backgrounds. This is mainly reflected by the predominance of different upper secondary educational choices in different social groups, as regards both the choice between 3 or 4-year and 2-year studies and the choice between theoretical and vocational studies, as well as the choice between individual lines conferring different qualifications.

The lines of upper secondary school chosen by young persons also present regional differences - a sign of limited geographical equality. To a great extent this can no doubt be attributed to the different occupational structures of different regions, but here again, regional differences are probably due in part to lack of information.

Grades

The distributions of final grades differ in character between the three groups of lines, viz 3 and 4-year theoretical lines, 2-year theoretical and 2-year vocational lines. The distribution of grades in the 3 and 4-year lines is characterized by a larger proportion of high grades and a smaller proportion of low ones than in the 2-year lines. Accordingly, the distribution of grades in the 3 and 4-year lines can be termed more positive than the distributions of the 2-year lines. For similar reasons, the distribution of grades in the 2-year theoretical lines can be termed more positive than that of the vocational lines, while the distribution of women's grades is more positive than that of the men in the corresponding groups of lines. By the same criterion, young persons in the two theoretical groups of lines coming from graduate and white-collar families show a more positive grade profile then the other background groups. The graduate group does best, while the group representing unskilled workers does worst.

The term "grade relation" is used to indicate a comparison between upper secondary school and compulsory school grades: this relation is positive when the upper secondary school grade is higher, negative when it is lower and neutral when it is on the same level as the compulsory school grade. Most of the young persons taking 3 and 4-year lines have a negative grade relation, while most of those taking 2-year lines have a neutral or positive grade relation. Where individual lines are concerned, negative grade relations occur most commonly in the Natural Science, Technical and Social Science lines. Of the 2-year theoretical lines, it is the Social line that has the largest proportion of positive grade relations.

This is a natural consequence of the structure of the grading system. More exacting lines are normally entered by young persons with better compulsory school grades, while the less exacting lines are taken by those with inferior compulsory school grades. When these young persons are awarded grades in upper secondary school, with reference to all students throughout the country in the year concerned, they are distributed between the various grades for each subject according to percentages specified in the curriculum.

Thus if students taking a particular line or group of lines are recruited from those with higher grades, several of them are likely to receive upper

secondary school grades below those obtained in compulsory school. And conversely, if students with low compulsory school grades are recruited, several of them should obtain higher grades in upper secondary school.

One striking impression conveyed by the interviews is that young persons regard themselves as the sole cause of their grades declining in upper secondary school. They worked hard, but they were not good enough. Failure was followed at first by renewed efforts, but repeated failures eventually made them apathetic about their studies. They blame themselves for this apathy. They feel that they should have studied more efficiently, planned their studies better. They were insufficiently mature, they were school-fatiqued and so on. They feel that they themselves are to blame for their declining grades.

Putting things drastically, one is tempted to say that, judging by the interviews, most of the students have not "seen through" the system. For strictly speaking, the declining grades were to a great extent a consequence of the grading system.

Students' post-secondary activities

The proportions of students gainfully employed and studying vary, of course, from one group of upper secondary school lines to another, owing to differences in the length of the courses of studies. The young persons replying to the questionnaire had been engaged in post-secondary activities for various lengths of time. The degree of vocational preparation provided by the different lines also has a crucial bearing on the proportion of young persons studying or gainfully employed.

The interviews convey the impression that these young persons are poorly equipped to cope with a period of unemployment. Society should constantly endeavour to minimize unemployment, which is a cruel and destructive experience for young persons. Unemployment exists, however, and schools should accept responsibility for preparing young persons for a possible period of unemployment. This may involve presenting different political attitudes towards unemployment, supplying information about actual measures of labour policy and organizing discussions of attitudes to the situation for unemployed persons and ways of coping with a period of unemployment.

The questionnaire data and interview responses present anything but a homogeneous picture of the post-secondary activities of young persons. By no means all the students completing one of the 3 or 4-year lines, sometimes termed "study preparation lines", go on to post-secondary education. Those who enter employment instead have thus received no vocational education except their theoretical upper secondary schooling. The theoretical side of upper secondary school ought, therefore, at least to some extent, to prepare students for entering employment.

Vocational focus tends to be homogeneous among students from certain lines and more heterogeneous among those taking other lines. The latter choose widely diverging occupations. The interviews also convey the impression that young persons from one and the same line can choose very different occupations.

Social background influences the direction of vocational choise. For example, students from graduate and senior white-collar families taking 3 and 4-year lines are under-represented in manufacturing trades, which on the other hand attract the greater proportion of male students whose parents are unskilled manual workers.

Young persons' opinions of the educational and occupational value of upper secondary schooling

In their assessments of the value of school subjects as a preparation for post-secondary education and gainfull employment respectively, a larger proportion of young persons were positive regarding the former. This result can be taken as an expression of the criticism of upper secondary schooling voiced in the interviews as being excessively isolated from employment.

The respondents can be said to have been favourable in their opinion concerning the value of upper secondary school subjects for further studies. The replies to the questionnaire indicate that they are satisfied on the whole with the knowledge they have acquired. The interviews confirm this impression: upper secondary schooling has provided a good foundation for further studies, although shortcomings exist regarding the acquisition of study techniques and in other respects.

The young persons taking part in the interviews felt that upper secondary schools were excessively isolated from the community at large. They

criticized school as "a world apart". They feel at home there, they are familiar with the routines, but activities there exist for their own sake. The respondents have stressed their desire for schools to open out more on to the community, broaden the range of their activities and make more use of the local community and the present as aids to teaching.

The respondents would like to have more concrete experience of working life. What they want above all is lengthy periods of vocational practice in a number of possible fields of future gainful activity, with support and guidance from school.

Relation to reality, the incorporation of reality in instruction, more theory combined with practice at the expense of the abstract elements - these are some of the demands put forward by the respondents concerning upper secondary schooling. And greater depth of study! They approve of the idea of special assignments. The respondents have an appetite for meaningful knowledge. Fragmentation and the superficial rote learning of facts are obstacles in their path.

The respondents would like to study the nuclear subjects of a line in depth. This desire is prompted by an effort to penetrate an area thoroughly, to devote so much time to a subject as to experience a form of competence through the deeper knowledge acquired. If other subjects are regarded as completely separate from the nuclear subjects, they can be experienced as an obstacle in the way of this deeper knowledge.

Young persons' attitude to the value of upper secondary schooling as a factor of personal development

The interviews do not convey a bright picture of the role of upper secondary schooling in the students' personal development. What happens, for instance, to the students' self-confidence? Repeated failures, despite renewed efforts, eventually give many students a feeling of resignation. During the important developmental period that upper secondary students are passing through, many of them seldom feel that their efforts are satisfactory. Only the best efforts count. It is the students achieving these efforts who receive

the praise and appreciation that every young person needs in order to develop healthy self-confidence. Few adults would put up with a job where their work input is rarely sufficient, and where every effort they make will inevitably be judged inferior. Such, however, is the situation for many young persons attending upper secondary school.

When upper secondary school students have made an educational effort on a level with their capacity, they ought reasonably to experience satisfaction, pleasure and pride in what they have achieved. As it is, they are constantly being made to think that their achievement is a poor one. Moreover, they are obliged as far as possible to conceal gaps in their knowledge, with the result that the gaps themselves cannot be filled.

The curriculum underlines the importance of students being taught to co-operate. As we have already seen, the ex-students distinguish between two possible ways of practising co-operation in school: one of these is informally based on the natural contact between classmates, while the other is based on co-operative situations organized by the school in connection with various study assignments. Schools have helped them to develop their capacity to co-operate, but mostly, they feel, by giving them opportunities of informal contact. By contrast, they do not have much time for the co-operation practice arranged by schools. For one thing there was too little of it, and for another these co-operative situations often developed into an individual search for knowledge within the framework of a group. But above all, every effort at co-operation was frustrated by the competition built into the grading system. Thus the interview material does not convey the impression that adequate provision has been made for the school objective of developing the students' ability to co-operate.

The young persons interviewed vigorously criticized schools as regards their efforts in pursuit of the aim of "developing independent and critical attitudes" among students. Too little scope, they felt, was given for discussing things and drawing one's own conclusions.

The interviews suggest that a very important part is played by the teacher. This is perhaps self-evident, but we are nonetheless surprised by the ecstatic remarks made by the respondents on the subject. We cannot but endorse this as regards both the students' acquisition of knowledge and their personal development: as they see it, schools now work in such a way that the benefits

of teaching stand or fall by the way in which it is concucted by the teacher. Thus the demands made on the teacher are very exacting indeed.

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